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A LEGACY FROM THE DEAD LANGUAGES

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The term "a dead language" is one of those merciless phrases which make an accusation and convict of guilt at the same time. A dead language? Why cumbereth it the ground? But a moment's thought makes plain that the sting in this phrase lies in an implication which is wholly unwarranted. We may call a language dead without necessarily implying that its usefulness is at an end. I do not mean only that in a dead language may be embodied a literature which the world cannot let die. The language itself, though no longer spoken by a great people, may still be playing an active part in the world. And the fact is that the classical languages, which we call dead, constitute today an active and a mighty influence in the life of our own mother-tongue, for they are in large measure determining the direction and character of its growth.

We live in a period of extraordinary industrial and intellectual activity. Discoveries and inventions follow thick after one another and new theories abound in every department of human thought. To these mighty changes language must be constantly adapting itself. New words must be coined for the new concepts which arise and changing habits of thought demand changed syntactical and rhetorical phrasing. These demands seem more urgent in the case of our mother-tongue than in any other language. As Professor Matthews points out, English is spoken today by three times as many people as, for instance, French, and those who speak English are scattered over a large portion of the earth. They have therefore a much wider range of interests and more points of contact with other peoples than have the stay-at-home French. All this means more new ideas and necessarily more words to express those ideas. And the extraordinary enlargement of the great English dictionaries during recent years confirms this assertion.

Now in any language the growth of vocabulary proceeds along two different lines. In the first place, existing words may, without change of form, acquire new meanings, and secondly, compounding and borrowing may produce entirely new forms. Thus when Cicero undertook to expound the philosophy of the Greeks for the benefit of his fellow-citizens he found himself often dealing with ideas which were foreign to Italian thinking and for which therefore the Latin language had no words. Accordingly he was compelled to provide himself with a philosophical nomenclature by giving new meanings to familiar Latin words. What Cicero did consciously and more or less arbitrarily for Latin is occurring daily without conscious purpose in every living language. Words, like men, have their life-history, and the years as they pass bring many variations of meaning. Many of the words in familiar use today are changing in meaning or acquiring new meaning as we speak them, but some lapse of time is usually necessary before we perceive the change. Thus "fuse," "machine," "recall," "function," "conservation," "promoter," "pool," "primary" have certain meanings in our ears of which our ancestors knew nothing.

But I am more concerned just now with the growth which involves the formation of new words, and I wish to emphasize and illustrate certain well-known but often ignored facts as to the sources from which these new word-forms are derived. I shall give as examples illustrating what I have to say numerous words which we have borrowed from the Latin and Greek. These words are all new in English. That is, they were first used as English words since the end of the eighteenth century. Each one of them is a proof of the living influence on English of the classical languages today. To put this beyond question I have passed over many words which are indeed of recent formation but which might have been suggested by kindred words already in use. For instance "commuter," "cremate," "formulate," "incinerator," "paternalism," "insurgency," "recalcitrant," "disintegrate," "intermediary," "incipience," "decentralization," "preferential," "refrigerator" were first heard as English words within the last hundred years. But they may be explained, not as direct borrowings from Latin and Greek, but as derivations from kindred words long in

use in English. Unlike these, the examples I shall give seem to have come to us directly from the ancient languages, their migration being assisted by no kindred already established in the English language. Perhaps allowance must be made for other influences in the case of some whose introduction into English was made easier by the fact that other languages were taking them up at the same time.

So far as the multitudes of new scientific and technical terms are concerned, no discussion is necessary. Scientists by general agreement draw upon the resources of Greek and Latin for new words to designate their discoveries and inventions. It is true that sometimes linguistic monsters are thus produced which hardly seem to be English words. Nay, our mother-tongue should not bear the whole responsibility for them, for scientists of other lands likewise harbor them and they are found alike in the pages of English, French, and German treatises. Such words may be said to constitute the true Volapük or Esperanza. It is to be remembered, however, that the less abstruse of these technical terms may in these days of popularized science and philosophy become familiar to the laity also and thus be gradually taken over into the language of daily life, their original meaning as scientific terms perhaps suffering some modification to meet the needs of their new environment. Such words as "dynamic," "habitat," "sanitary," "altruist," "nihilist," "cyclone," "pessimism," "cosmic," "egoism," "esthetic," "agnostic," and a host of others constitute a large debt which English owes to recent scientific advance and to those dead languages from which, within our own times, science has borrowed them. But besides these technical terms there are many other words of Latin and Greek derivation which have recently come in to enlarge the resources of the English language. Many of these have been formed to describe new inventions in the field of industry, but they are not mere technical terms. They constitute a permanent enrichment of our vocabulary; they help to make up the later rings of growth on the mighty trunk of our English speech. The remarkable fact is that not the scholar alone but the man on the street takes more kindly to these words of Latin and Greek extraction than to derivatives formed from existing words

for expressing the same idea. Nay, when a compound made up of familiar words seems in process of adoption, a borrowed word will often crowd it out. Let me give a few examples, which could be easily multiplied, of words whose entrance into our language is of recent date, in order that the present tendency of our development may be made plain.

Thus we were not content with the perfectly intelligible compound "airship," but must needs import a new word, "aeroplane," retaining, however, the other with a difference of meaning. For the engineer of the new flying machine the newspapers proposed "birdman," but that seemed hopelessly farfetched and affected, while its Latin equivalent, "aviator," instantly proved acceptable. Fifteen years ago we heard frequently of "horseless carriages"; they are all "automobiles" now. "Stenographer" is preferred to "shorthand writer," "bibliophile" is coined to take its place beside "booklover," and "bicameral" beside "two-chambered." I remember that many years ago the phrase "talking machine" had its chance but could not hold the field against "phonograph." We are prone to say "lactometer" rather than "milk gauge," "cereal" rather than "breakfast food," "hydrant" rather than "water plug," "linoleum" rather than "oilcloth." "Kerosene" was once called "rock oil," but that name has gone out of fashion, "as graphite" has supplanted "black lead," and "stereopticon," "magic lantern." Doubtless the cumbersome phrase "moving-picture show" will soon give way in common speech to "biograph" or even "kinematoscope."

Often the borrowed word is preferred even when a simple English word of long standing is at hand to meet the need. When the bicycle first came into general use the monosyllable "wheel" seemed for a time likely to be adopted to describe the new device. But the classical derivative, despite its handicap of three syllables, has triumphed. Will the English fondness for brevity, thus defeated, win in the end by reducing the polysyllable to "bike"? But even unwieldy length does not bar out the new word, especially when differences of meaning are to be discriminated. "Amelioration" is coined in spite of "betterment," "demoralize," in spite of "corrupt," "manipulate," in spite of "handle." We have recently

formed the word "deplete," though we already had "exhaust"; "disintegrate," though we already had "decompose"; "prospectus," though we already had "announcement"; "amorphous," though we already had "shapeless"; "phase," though we already had "aspect"; "donate," though we already had "give."

In view of the fondness for Latin and Greek thus exemplified, it does not surprise us to observe that when a word is needed to describe a wholly new invention or process we usually turn to these languages. Such words as "lithograph," "camera," "referendum," "pyrography," "manicure," "heliograph," "hypnotism," "semaphore," "incandescent," "photograph," and numberless others, new formations for which we have no already existing synonyms, illustrate one phase of our recently incurred indebtedness to Greece and Rome.

Another phase of this debt involves a large group of words long obsolete which are just now coming into general use again. Most of these words were adopted into the English language in what is known as the fourth period of Latin, from 1550 to 1660. Soon thereafter they fell into disuse and they do not seem to occur in any eighteenth-century book. Apparently the passion for transplanting Latin words into English in the Elizabethan era and the half-century following overleaped itself and more words were imported than Englishmen of the succeeding generations cared to use. But many of these neglected words were again taken up in the nineteenth century and they constitute an integral part of the English of today. This is the history, among many others, of "dirigible," "feline," "innocuous," "cosmopolite," "autonomy," "recuperate," "obsess," "cult," "denude," "drastic," "pyrotechnics."

The most remarkable fact about all this free borrowing is that it does not seem to be really necessary. The English we have inherited from our fathers, if its resources were fully employed, might be adequate to the intelligible expression of new ideas without having any further recourse to the classical tongues. In fact, English possesses a certain device which gives it for this purpose a great advantage over some other languages. Practically any word in the language may without change be used as an adjective

by simply placing it as a modifier before the noun. Thus we speak of a "spark plug," "rock crusher," "crush hat," "house-to-house canvass," the "nine-o'clock boat," a "through train," the "then president." If any such phrase fills an existing need and is accepted as such, it may come to be written as a compound word either with or without the hyphen. Finally the two distinct ideas may coalesce, so that in uttering the new word thus formed we think, not of its two elements, but of the single idea for which it stands. It is, however, true that in most cases such compounds of recent formation have stopped short of complete amalgamation. Moreover, many of those which seem most popular have an odd sound in our ears and carry something of a humorous connotation. Such words as "stemwinder," "grubstake," "standpatter," "strap-hanger," "globe-trotter," "dug-out," "sky-scraper" owe their vogue largely to their quaintness, and they will probably drop out and be forgotten when we tire of their oddity. Compounding words to make new ones is no longer an easy and familiar process in English.

In partial explanation of this hostility toward compounds, Bradley says, in his *Making of English*:

A compound word is a description, often an imperfect description; and when an object of perception or thought is familiar to us, we desire that its name shall suggest the thing to our minds directly and not through the intervention of irrelevant ideas. Accordingly a compound word for a simple notion gives us a certain sense of inconvenience, unless we are able to forget its literal meaning. It would seem that the English are, from whatever cause, more conscious of this inconvenience than are the speakers of some other languages. . . . Even now a well-established compound is often partly superseded by a simple word or a derivative; for example, we use the word "steamer" more frequently than "steamboat" or "steamship."

A striking confirmation of this explanation is afforded by the rivalry between the two words "standpoint" and "viewpoint." Though the former has long been in good use and the statute of limitations might seem to cover any irregularity in its formation, yet we cannot treat it as a simple word to designate a simple idea, but as we use it we are still conscious of the two elements which make it up. Hence has arisen the objection to it on the part of the hypercritical, who think "viewpoint" more logical.

But whatever the explanation may be, the fact remains that when in need of a new word we turn instinctively to Latin and Greek rather than to English materials. The former we mold to our purpose with ready and sure touch and we are satisfied with the results; the latter seem to us hard to work over and the product when we make the attempt is often grotesque. The uncertainty we feel in handling derivatives from existing words is illustrated by the way the public has wavered between the two forms "motor-man" and "motorneer." A similar difficulty often arises when we attempt to inflect a new compound. We say "typewriting" and "typewritten," but we balk at "typewrote." On the other hand, in England they substitute for our cumbersome compound the simple Greek base "type" and conjugate it with perfect freedom in all modes and tenses, forming from it also such derivatives as "typist." It is perfectly natural for us to build new words upon the Greek root "graph" and then conjugate them throughout. The inventor of the machine for recording conversation called his device a "dictograph." The fact that the word thus made up is half Latin and half Greek may lead us to the conclusion that he was no scholar. If so, the incident is all the more significant for our present purpose, for it shows again that not only the conscious purpose of the scholar but also the instinct of the practical man turns to the classical element when a new word is needed. Once formed in this manner the word is easily equipped with any inflectional termination: granted "dictograph," we take no offense at "dictographed," "dictographing," etc. On the other hand, no one can read without a shudder this specimen of recent newspaper English: "The news was wirelesslyed from the ship."

It is evident from these considerations that English relies for the materials of growth principally upon the Latin and Greek languages. It is enabled to expand so as to meet the increasing demands of our twentieth-century civilization chiefly by virtue of its inheritance from Greece and Rome. Some students profess to look upon this fact with regret, but I cannot agree with them. I cannot think of the swarms of new words that are coming to us from Greek and Latin as interlopers. I cannot see how the erection of a high protective tariff against such importation would

enrich our English tongue. Not by what we exclude but by what we receive and truly assimilate are our resources increased. Nor do these words displace the old ones. So far is that from being the case that at the very time when we are welcoming new words from the Latin and Greek we are also bringing back into familiar use many Early English words which had seemed obsolete. Our classical expansion goes hand in hand with a Saxon revival. And we are only the richer for it all.

But what shall we say of those languages which thus make possible the major portion of our growth? In view of the active influence they are today wielding in the development of English, the question may fairly be asked whether it is not misleading to call them the dead languages.